

DARLINGTON SCHOOLS FORUM

19th May 2015

ITEM NO 9

DISCRETIONARY HOME TO SCHOOL TRANSPORT ARRANGEMENTS

Purpose of Report

1. To provide School Forum with an update on the discretionary home to school transport arrangements for September 2014 and September 2015 cohort.

Background

2. In February 2012 the Local Authority approved a move to provide the statutory minimum on all of its services; this included moving the home to school transport criteria from 2 to 3 miles. The LA agreed to phase the implementation of a statutory minimum service beginning with Year 7 pupils starting school in September 2013. The new policy has been applied to each cohort starting secondary school from September 2013 but the old policy remains in place for the older year groups until it becomes totally phased out in July 2017.
3. Secondary Head Teachers raised concerns about the potential impact the change in policy would have due to the removal of the historic entitlement of associated transport for a significant number of children. The concerns were for socio-economically disadvantaged families who may have suffered disproportionately because they would no longer have affordable and efficient means of getting to and from school on a daily basis. Secondary Head Teachers also raised concerns about the potential for poor attendance resulting in lower standards; increased behaviour issues; a widening of the gap in achievement between different socio-economic groups; the creation of diverse and un-coordinated arrangements for communities which have historically seen significant benefits from the support of associated Secondary school provision.
4. In response, Hummersknott and Hurworth Schools amended their admission criteria in order to maintain their historical links through the creation of 'Associated Areas'. Carmel maintained their admission criteria, as this preserved existing arrangements with the faith based primary schools.
5. In an attempt to ensure the historical arrangements were maintained for the Year 7 children who would be starting school in September 2013, Schools Forum approved financial support to fund the difference between statutory services and the cost of maintaining existing arrangements for the 5 years that this cohort would be attending Secondary school. The paper was approved on 28th February 2012 releasing £70,000 from the 2012/13 budget.

6. At Schools Forum in March 2013 a further £70,000 was released from the 2013/14 budget to continue to support discretionary transport arrangements in Darlington. The commitment was provided for 5 years to ensure that the initial cohorts affected by the change in policy would be supported through their time in secondary school.
7. A third paper, presented on 2nd July 2013 provided Schools Forum with the opportunity to review the previous discussions and agree the following resolutions moving forward:
 - That approval be given to the release of an additional £70,000 per year to support the continuation of existing transport arrangements for the cohort of children starting secondary school in September 2014. (This would mean the annual deduction for transport provision would be £140,000 for a period of five years).
 - That Secondary Head Teachers be encouraged to implement a charging policy to recoup costs from parents, enabling the existing transport arrangements to continue year on year, given the provision that the total costs to Schools Forum does not exceed £150,000 per financial year.
 - That a cross-phase group be established to further consider this issue and report back to the Forum next year.
 - That the Chair, in consultation with the Head of School and Pupil Support Services, draw up Terms of Reference for the cross-phase group referred to above and that this be circulated to members of the Schools Forum when seeking nominations for the group.

Progress and Development

Working Group

8. A working group was established during the autumn term of 2013. The group initially met three times to discuss the scope of the group and to report back on progress, define timescales, review current provision and monitor against the specific resolutions made by Schools Forum. The group consisted of 3 secondary school reps, 3 primary school reps and 3 Local Authority reps.
9. The group has continued to meet at least once a term, sometimes more regularly if specific discussion dictates. Since September 2014 the group has predominantly consisted of LA and Secondary school representatives as the discussion became quite detailed and school/pupil specific.
10. From September 2015 onwards, it is felt to be important to ensure Primary Schools are once again represented on the working group and this paper recommends that nominations are sought before this end of the current summer term.

Charging Policy

11. Following discussions through the working group and with agreement from all secondary schools in Darlington, a commitment was given to continue to provide non-statutory places on existing routes to parent/carers of secondary age children, as long as a cost was introduced for this provision.

12. Since September 2014, parent/carers who are not entitled to 'free' transport can apply for a fare paying place on an existing school coach, where there is availability. The spaces are limited and there is no guarantee that every child who applies will be allocated a place.
13. During its first year of operation (Sept 2014 – July 2015) the cost to parents has been charged at £1.50 per day. The working group established the basis of the charging policy including terms and conditions for parents and each school is responsible for collecting the money from parents and returning this payment to the LA. The charge of £1.50 per day is not representative of the total costs of providing the services but it was felt to be a reasonable charge for parents to pay upon the introduction of a charging policy would assist to recoup some funding towards the overall costs.
14. Based on the total cost of each individual route the LA identifies those children who are entitled to a 'free' place because they statutorily entitled and deducts this amount from the overall cost of the route. The LA then calculates the amount of income the school should accrue from parental charges; this is invoiced direct to the school. Any remaining shortfall in income is currently charged to the top-sliced funding from the Schools Forum pot.
15. For the period beginning September 2014 to end of March 2015 (Year 7 and 8 pupils) the following breakdown applies for the discretionary home to school transport arrangements:
 - Total pupil cost - £115,451.68
 - Total cost to Parents - £39,444.01 (34%)
 - Total cost to School forum – £76,007.67 (66%)
16. Of the funding that has been allocated for school transport £67,000 has been given back to the DSG pot for school funding.
17. A review of the charging policy was undertaken with the working group between January and March 2015. The outcome of this review has been to improve communications to parents, to provide greater clarity around the eligibility criteria, to provide more accurate information to each school and to define a clear application process. A copy of the revised policy for discretionary transport arrangements is attached at Appendix A.
18. The most significant outcome of the review undertaken by the working group was the decision to increase the costs to parents to £1.75 per day from September 2015. This daily cost remains slightly below the cost of a daily bus ticket from Arriva and although a 25p increase is high, this was felt to be necessary to ensure sufficient income is generated to support the continuation of discretionary transport arrangements. This is particularly important because the current agreement for School Forum funding will come to an end in 2017/18 and the balance of school/parent contribution needs to be sustainable to continue to provide a transport service.
19. The application process for children wishing to be considered for discretionary transport is currently open to parents. Once the closing date has been reached the LA will be calculating the potential costs to parents, schools and Schools Forum for

September 2015 onwards. This information will be shared with the working group as soon as it becomes available.

20. Following this second year of operating a charging policy, the LA will have more confidence in the process, the potential number of applicants and the potential costs to Schools Forum over the coming years. It is the intention of the LA to provide an update report to Schools Forum members at the November 2015 meeting which will provide forecast figures and more detailed financial information.

Contract re-tendering process

21. All contracts for the provision of home to school transport (statutory and discretionary) have been part of a Framework agreement between Darlington Borough Council and individual contract providers. The Framework was established prior to discussions about changes in policy and operationally it has presented some difficulties in achieving best value or flexibility in service options.
22. The LA has been heavily engaged in reviewing the current framework agreement and developing a new contract model which will be implemented during the second half of 2015. It is envisaged that the new tendering model will allow a greater flexibility when procuring individual routes so that best value can be achieved and the overall cost of transport provision can be reduced.
23. All contracts will still be provided through the contract agreements with DBC and any savings associated with discretionary routes will be passed directly through to the schools e.g. DBC will only recoup the actual costs of the service.
24. The re-tendering process is still underway at the time of this report and therefore the impact of the changes and levels of actual savings are not yet known. Further information will be provided to the working group on an on-going basis.

Sustainable Options

25. It has always been the intention of the working group to consider and develop sustainable options to enable the continued delivery of a discretionary transport arrangement, however, reduced capacity and a lack of experience in developing sustainable transport options has limited the amount of work that has been undertaken to date.
26. From 1st April 2015 the LA has commissioned the services of Paul Robson, via Hartlepool Borough Council, to support with this specific area of work. Paul is currently the Managing Director of PKR Associates Ltd but he has gained his experience of transport services from working within a Local Authority setting for a period of 21 years. Paul also provides experience and knowledge from his role as the North East Regional Chair for the Association of Transport Coordinating Officers (ATCO) which is a national body bringing together local authority officers whose work involves responsibilities for passenger transport.
27. Before the end of the summer term Paul will meet with the working group to scope his involvement and areas for development. Paul will undertake research and present

options to the group for their consideration. If required, Paul can support the implementation of preferred options to ensure their success. An £11,500 contribution to the cost of Paul's services has been committed from the under spend available within the transport funding made available by Schools Forum, this is felt to be an important invest-to-save proposal to ensure the future service can be self-funding.

Conclusions / Summary

28. School Forum members are asked to note that:

- A significant amount of work has been undertaken to progress the discretionary transport arrangements to date and to ensure that the costs to Schools Forum are kept within the limits required. The working group is hopeful that a model can be developed that would enable an under spend to be returned to Schools Forum each year and that ultimately a self-financing model can be created.
- The working group continues to meet on a regular basis to progress and monitor the resolutions identified by Schools Forum. A request for primary representatives will be issued before the end of the summer term.
- A charging policy has been successfully introduced and this is making savings against the costs to Schools Forum. Although it is recognised that the contributions that parents are prepared to make will be limited, it is important that a charging policy is maintained.
- The revised tendering arrangements which the Council will introduce this year will hopefully provide a level of savings and will also allow flexibility within the contracts to ensure value for money is achieved.
- Further work is to be undertaken with regard to considering sustainable models and options for future long term delivery of a discretionary home to school transport service.

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